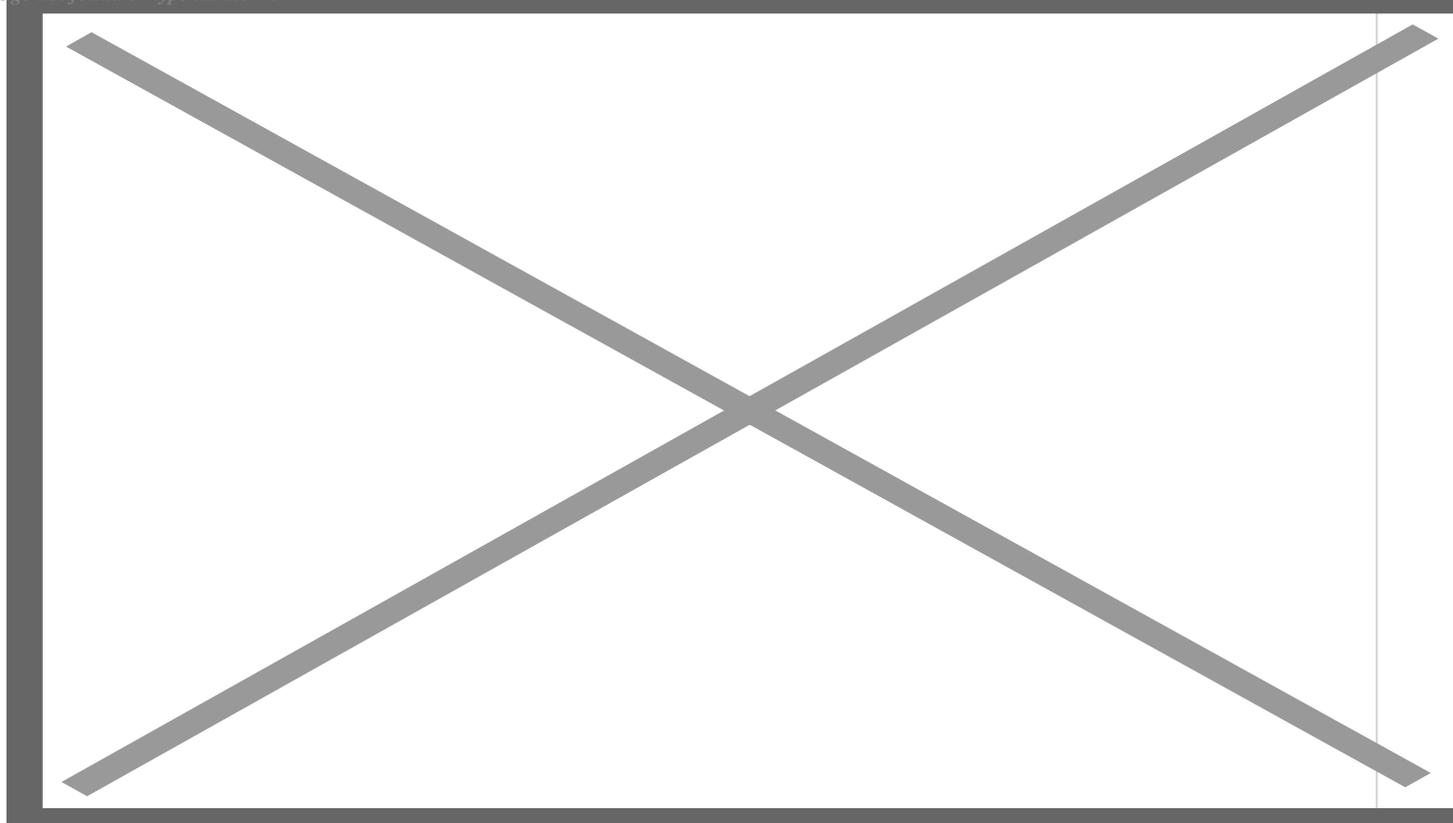


U.S. military prepares to evacuate Niger

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Washington, August 19 (RHC)-- The Pentagon is set to evacuate two drone bases in Niger as a precaution under the new military government, Air Force Gen. James Hecker told reporters on Friday in Washington. He noted that the U.S. is scouting northern Africa's Sahel and Saharan regions for allies "that we could maybe partner up with, and then move our assets there," Hecker revealed, while declining to name specific countries. "[We] know where we would like the base to be, but more of that's going to be diplomatic," he said.

Hecker clarified that Washington had not made a final decision on whether to classify the Nigerien palace guard's overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum last month as a coup -- a decision that would require it to sever most of the military and security ties the two nations share.

Making that decision could take “weeks or much longer,” Hecker explained, acknowledging that leaving Niger “obviously will have an effect” on US intelligence and counterterrorism work, regardless of whether the exit happened because the Biden administration had rejected cooperation with the U.S.-trained Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani’s military government or because that government had kicked them out.

The military’s evacuation planning involved scenarios in which the Americans had to leave in a hurry, taking only what they could not afford to leave behind, and more leisurely versions - “but of course what we hope for is that we have a peaceful diplomatic solution to this and we don’t have to leave,” the American general concluded.

Before the takeover, the U.S. and France had 1,000 and 1,500 troops stationed in Niger, respectively, with several military bases in Niamey and the southern city of Agadez, among other places. The U.S. is likely hoping to avoid a repeat of its disastrous departure from Afghanistan, which left millions of dollars’ worth of military equipment and hundreds of Afghan collaborators in the hands of the Taliban.

Niger’s neighbors in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced on Wednesday they were calling up a “Standby Force” to restore Bazoum to power, following through on their threat to intervene militarily if Bazoum was not restored by a deadline that has come and gone.

ECOWAS members Burkina Faso and Mali have already warned they would view any military move on Niger as a declaration of war against themselves.

Niger’s military government, which has begun recruiting volunteers to resist any potential invasion, has allegedly warned that Bazoum will be killed in the event of an invasion, according to Western officials. The African Union has refused to endorse ECOWAS’ plans, though France backs the invasion of its former colonial property and the US has refused to rule out supporting it.

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